Experience and expectations of transition to higher education: a qualitative exploration

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Abstract

Transition to higher education is challenging, and more so for some groups. The transition from Level 3 foundation year into Level 4 is an opportunity to explore student perspectives on transition. Qualitative survey and focus group data were collected from current and previous Level 3 students, to ascertain student perceptions about induction, level of belonging, confidence about Level 4 and to identify useful support sources. Over a third of eligible Level 3 students (*n* = 102) participated, but participation amongst eligible Level 4, 5 and 6 students was limited. Despite the heterogeneous nature of Level 3 students the majority recognised the value of the foundation year. Most Level 3 students did not identify with the university. Those who did highlighted the importance of social outlets such as clubs and societies. A major cause of dissatisfaction was perceived lack of clarity about the foundation year, including the programme, subjects and physical location of the course. This was apparent across all ethnicities, age groups and genders. Among previous Level 3 students, personal sources of support were uniformly valued although the precise source varied by year of study. Support from academic staff, via office hours and as personal tutors, was rated as most important. Enabling academic staff to offer support to students throughout their studies, and clear consistent information available throughout an ongoing transition, may help to minimise these issues.

Introduction

Successful transition to higher education is required for undergraduate students to achieve academic success (Parker et al, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012). Transition can be defined as the internal process occurring when students move to the unfamiliar while adjusting to higher education (Perry & Allard, 2003). How students respond to the multiple changes associated with higher education, such as new learning environment, altered finances, social and academic changes (Cheng et al, 2015), is shaped by factors such as previous educational and life experiences (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998), expectations of higher education (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Cook & Leckey, 1999) and preparedness (Lowe & Cook, 2003). All of these represent potential challenges to institutions as well as students (Greenbank, 2007; Briggs et al, 2012). If this transition is unsuccessful, students are less likely to continue in higher education (Katanis, 2000; McInnes et al, 2000). Therefore transition, and how it is negotiated is of real importance (Hussey & Smith, 2010) to the student and the university.

Support at the beginning of academic life matters (Select Committee on Education and Employment, 2001), since the majority of students who leave higher education do so early on in their studies (Thomas, 2012a; Harvey et al, 2006; Yorke, 1999). One important route into higher education is the foundation year, offered by many UK universities to those without the requisite

qualifications or subjects to enter their desired programme of university study directly. The Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics (STEM) foundation year is a key part of the Kingston University recruitment drive, attracting large numbers of applicants annually. Approximately 10% of those who successfully complete it do not progress into Level 4 at the university– a significant loss to the university and a setback to those students. The STEM foundation year runs at a local sister college, Kingston College, situated close by the main university campus. Foundation (Level 3) students are registered to the college and the university with identification cards for both; they are eligible to partake in university and college activities, clubs and societies. Successful completion of the foundation year results in direct progress into Level 4 at the university. Understanding the experiences, hopes and expectations of current Level 3 students taking the foundation year, and identifying the sources of support that previous foundation students found helpful, could help to ensure that the university induction programme meets the needs of this diverse group. It will also provide insight into the wider student experience of transition.

Methods

Ethics approval was granted by the Kingston University Centre for Higher Education Research and Practice Research Ethics Committee. Quantitative data was collected by questionnaire and qualitative data by focus groups and through open ended text boxes within the questionnaires.

Quantitative data

Background information collected from all participants included age, gender, ethnicity and year of study.

Level 3 respondents

Students were asked whether the induction helped them to integrate into their course, whether they felt part of the college and/or the university and their current and anticipated confidence levels about entering Level 4. Five point Likert rating scales were used (from 'strongly agree/ completely confident' to 'strongly disagree/ completely unconfident'). Open text boxes to record additional comments were included.

Levels 4, 5 and 6

Students were asked to retrospectively rate different named types of support in order of perceived importance during Level 3 study (from 1 to 7; 1 being most and 7 being least important). In addition they were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed that they felt part of the university and/or part of the college. Retrospective confidence levels about moving from Level 3 to Level 4 were gathered using a five point Likert rating scale (from 'completely unconfident' to 'completely confident'). Students could add additional comments to open text boxes.

Data collection

Level 3 questionnaires were distributed during taught classes common to several STEM pathways. A brief introduction to the project was given with a participant information sheet. Completion of questionnaires was during the session (approximately 10 minutes).

Online distribution of the questionnaires for Levels 4, 5 and 6 students was used, with personalised invitations to participate and a link to the survey distributed via university email, to avoid singling out foundation degree students within large taught modules.

Focus groups

Students at all levels could participate in focus groups at the university. Those who wanted to participate were emailed to organise mutually agreeable dates and times. Records of all email addresses were destroyed when focus groups were organised. All sessions were facilitated by two student partners; discussions were recorded using a voice recorder and contemporaneous notes.

Data analysis

Data were analysed by age, gender, year of study and ethnicity to determine whether these factors influenced participant responses. Key themes from qualitative data were identified using basic thematic analysis. Qualitative data included both focus group data and open text boxes within the questionnaires.

Results

Participants

Participant demographic data is shown in Table 1. Participants were limited to current Level 3 students (n = 102 respondents) at the college, and previous Level 3 students now in Level 4 (n = 10 respondents), Level 5 (n = 18 respondents) and Level 6 (n = 28 respondents) at the university. These response rates represented 37.4%, (Level 3), 4.7% (Level 4), 7.8% (Level 5) and 19.6% (Level 6) of eligible students respectively. Two focus groups were held. No secondary data were used.

Level 3 responses

No Level 3 students responded to the invitation to attend focus groups. Their qualitative data comprised 124 in-questionnaire comments. Three major themes arose: belonging, induction and confidence.

Belonging

The largest proportion of comments overall (n = 48; 39%) related to whether or not students felt that they belonged at the university and/or the college. While a small number valued the fact that they were effectively part of both, the majority of respondents (n = 29; 60%) felt part of the college, not the university (Table 2), largely due to the location of the foundation year at the college (n = 16; 55%). Some respondents felt that there was little effort to help them feel part of the university. Those who felt part of both the college and the university were a minority (n = 7; 15%), and they specified the important role of clubs and societies. A small number of students (n = 8; 17%) felt part of neither the university nor the college.

	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Gender				
Males	46 (45)	3 (30)	6 (33)	20 (71)
Females	51 (50)	5 (50)	12 (67)	
PNS*	4 (4)	2 (20)	0 (0)	1 (4)
Other	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Total	102 (100)	10 (100)	18 (100)	28 (100)
Age				
<21 years	67 (66)	7 (70)	4 (22)	0 (0)
≥21 years	20 (20)	2 (20)	13 (72)	27 (96)
PNS*	15 (14)	1 (10)	1 (6)	1 (4)
Total	102 (100)	10 (100)	18 (100)	28 (100)
Ethnicity				
White	27 (26)	1 (10)	9 (50)	15 (54)
Black	19 (19)	2 (20)	2 (11)	5 (18)
Asian	35 (34)	4 (40)	3 (17)	4 (14)
Mixed	8 (8)	0 (0)	3 (17)	1 (4)
PNS*	13 (13)	3 (30)	1 (5)	3 (11)
Total	102 (100)	10 (100)	18 (100)	28 (100)

Table 1 Demographics of study participants expressed as numbers (%).
*PNS = prefer not to say.

Statement	Themes, subthemes and illustrative quotes
'I feel part of Kingston university' AND 'I feel part of Kingston college'	1. **Included in both** (n=7, 15%): *'I can participate in uni societies & use both sites facilities'* 2. **Part of college, not uni** (n=29, 60%): **Societies help** (n=2, 7%): *'Only in societies'* **Lack of effort** (n=3, 10%): *'I don't feel much is done to make us feel like university students'* **Mature students** (n=2, 7%): *'College doesn't feel like a place for mature students'* **Lack of integration** (n=6, 21%): *'I expected more integration preparation for university'* **No lectures at university** (n=16, 55%): *'Feel like I'm still at school, I do not visit the university much, no lectures there'* 3. **Neither** (n=8, 17%): *'As lessons are not taught at uni but I don't class myself as a college student either'* 4. **Misc.** (n=4, 8%) *'Nothing that interests me'*

Table 2 Overall qualitative feedback from Level 3 students relating to belonging at the university and/or the college. This table summarises 48 comments related to whether or not students felt that they belonged at the university and/or the college.

More females than males did not feel part of the university (57% and 38% respectively), although 21% of males and 13% of females felt at home both within the university and the college.

By ethnicity, 53% of white, 57% of black, 72% of Asian and 25% of mixed race students did not feel they belonged at the university. Similar proportions felt at home both at the university and the college, and the major factors identified by them were the facilities and societies that helped them feel at home.

The same themes were apparent by age. Approximately two thirds of both age groups stated that they did not feel part of the university.

A greater proportion of those <21 years (17%) compared with those ≥21 years (1%) did not feel at home either at the college or the university.

Induction
35% of total comments related to their induction into the foundation course, of which 47% ($n = 20$) related to a lack of clarity about the foundation year. This included confusion about the location and uncertainty about their subjects (Table 3). No differences in response to induction were seen by gender. More older (≥21 years) than younger (<21 years) students felt negatively about the induction (50% versus 11% respectively). Similarly lack of clarity was highlighted across all ethnicities (white 60%, Black 40% & Asian 53% respectively).

Statement	Themes, subthemes and illustrative quotes
'The induction helped me feel comfortable & integrated into my course' **AND** 'The course was accurately described to me on application/ clearing'	1. **Lack of clarity** (n=19, 44%) **About the subjects** (n=8, 42%) 'I thought foundation would be pure maths as that was what I was told but it turned out to be maths & computing' **About the location** (n=3, 16%) 'Was not told the course takes place at the college campus' **About the programme** (n=8, 42%) 'Course was not clearly explained at the application stage' 2. **Personal responsibility** (n=3, 7%) 'I already did research on the course I applied for so got accurate information about it' 3. **Positive** (n=7, 16%): 'I was able to feel comfortable as I met new people at induction' 4. **Negative** (n=7, 16%): 'Induction was almost a touch light' 5. **Young vs. mature students** (n=2, 5%): 'Very little support or at least what I expected as a mature student' 6. **Clarity** (n=2, 5%): 'I was briefly told about foundation on the phone at clearing' 7. **Missed induction** (n=3, 7%): 'Came late so missed induction'.

Table 3 Overall qualitative feedback relating to induction from Level 3 students. This table summarises 43 comments related to their induction into the foundation course.

Statement	Themes, subthemes & illustrative quotes
'How confident do you feel NOW about going into Level 4' **AND** 'How confident do you THINK you will feel at the end of Level 3?'	1. **Confidence** (n=4, 18%): *'The foundation year lecture format is similar to that of university lectures'* 2. **Readiness/preparedness** (n=7, 32%): *'Feel I will be more prepared with dealing with level 4 now & even more after passing level 3'* 3. **Negative** (n=8, 36%): *'Confused…disappointed'* 4. **Positive** (n=1, 5%): *'Easy to understand & has a good atmosphere'* 5. **Lack of clarity** (n=2, 10%): *'Still unsure as to whether I will change my chosen degree'*

Table 4 Qualitative feedback from Level 3 respondents related to confidence about Level 4 study. This table summarises 22 comments related to confidence about moving into Level 4 study.

Confidence
Twenty two comments related to confidence about moving into Level 4 study (Table 4). Mixed emotions relating to readiness to move into Level 4 were seen across all ethnicities and both genders. A greater proportion of negative comments were seen from students aged ≥21 years compared with those aged <21 years (29% versus 18% respectively). For students ≥21 years, negative comments related to concerns about their own readiness to enter Level 4.

General
Eleven general comments were made, more than half of which related to a wish for greater links with the university (data not shown).

Level 4, 5 and 6 students
Qualitative data was limited to 3 areas about which students were asked to comment; namely belonging, what would have helped increase their confidence in transition from Level 3 to 4 and the appropriateness of the workload at Level 3.

Belonging:
Those now at Levels 4, 5 and 6 identified several of the same issues as the Level 3 students. They did not feel part of the university during their foundation year.

This sense of not belonging related both to the geographical location of the foundation year:

> *"Seeing there was no lectures given here I felt very out of place."*
> [Level 6 female]

and to the atmosphere and teaching style at the college:

> *'I found the environment unfriendly and added extra stress to my studies"*
> [Level 5 female].

Like current Level 3 students, many previous foundation students had felt part of neither the university nor the college:

> *"It was a bit like being stuck in a weird limbo. We weren't really university students, but we weren't college students either"*
> [Level 5 female]

Focus group feedback agreed; students suggested that moving the foundation year to the university would enhance belonging.

Confidence
Better integration with the university was strongly identified as a factor which would have increased student confidence in the transition from Level 3 to 4. In addition, the importance of personal tutors, availability of taught material online and meeting students from higher levels of their degree were identified by Level 5 students.

Focus group feedback agreed that meeting previous foundation students who had progressed to undergraduate study, would improve the Level 3 experience.

Perceived appropriateness of Level 3 material
The majority of responses were positive with regard to the foundation year material, and this increased with year of study. Eighty one % of Level 6, 70% of Level 5 and 25% of Level 4 responders agreed that Level 3 material was appropriate.

Discussion
This study focused on the experience of foundation programme students at one university. Nonetheless the findings have wider relevance. The delivery of material across partner institutions is not unusual, and all higher education students experience a transition from Level 3 to Level 4 study.

In this case, the majority of students surveyed were positive about the foundation programme, notable given the heterogeneous group who undertake it. Nonetheless the feedback highlighted important issues likely to impact upon the effectiveness of transition for all Level 3 students.

The importance of belonging has been identified as a critical component in helping students to integrate and engage within higher education (Thomas, 2012b). Feeling that they matter to the institution and are cared for by it helps ensure that students engage and are retained (Strayhorn, 2012; Hausman, 2009; Freeman et al, 2007). A sense of belonging can be fostered by early engagement with academic staff (Thomas, 2012b). Given this, it is worrying that approximately 60% of Level 3 students who responded did not feel they belonged at the university. Part of this may reflect the physical location of the foundation year, a few minutes away from the main university campus. Despite their geographical proximity, our data suggests that belonging does not just relate to physical location but to the learning environment fostered within different institutions. This has been recognised in other work (Reay et al, 2010) and may reflect differences between the teaching and learning environments, relationships with and support from staff between Levels 3 and 4 (Crabtree et al, 2007). Qualitative studies with students have identified university-led enablers of successful transition (Bowles et al, 2011). These include orientation, learning at university, facilities and social aspects. Many foundation year students are from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, have entered higher education through non-traditional routes, are first in their families to enter higher education or are mature students; traditionally hard-to-reach groups identified as likely to face more difficulties with transition than traditional students (O'Donnell & Tobell, 2007; Reay et al, 2010; Parker et al, 2017). Some applicants may not be realistic about their chances of success at university without first taking a foundation year, while for others, Level 3 study may not represent what they expected from university life. It has been shown that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who have experienced study delay in higher education, or who were less autonomously motivated for study were less likely to be flexible learners (Donche & Van Petegem, 2006). Addressing student expectations, establishing learner identities, provision of adequate support, enabling peer group interactions and approachable staff are all helpful strategies (Briggs et al, 2012). Central to engaging students are teaching styles and teaching staff (Zepke & Leach, 2010), and

personal support by academic staff was clearly valued in this study. This agrees with Money et al (2017), who found that students value support and relationships (with academic staff and their peers). Fostering these relationships will encourage student engagement, but staff need time and resource to enable this to happen.

Perceived lack of clarity about the foundation programme was widespread. This matters because a mismatch in expectations can result in lack of engagement or withdrawal from studies (Byrne et al, 2012). Also of concern was the lack of satisfaction apparent among BME students. For many UK institutions, narrowing the BME attainment gap is a key priority, and this needs further exploration.

Induction represents the start of the student journey. Our data suggests that students viewed induction as an event, delivered at a specific time point at the beginning of the academic year. This is problematic and others have suggested that it should not be an event but an ongoing process (Hussey & Smith, 2010; Lowe & Cook, 2003; Tinto, 1993), fostering interactions with peers, social and academic integration and academic preparation. Acclimatisation to higher education is likely to take place throughout the first year of study, and induction is merely the first part of it (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). Giving new students a social and information overload typically within the first week of term and assuming they will be able to integrate may not be in their best interests, ultimately meeting neither their needs nor those of the institution. Although the roles of clubs and societies were highlighted by those students who did identify with the university, not all students have the confidence, time or interest to engage with social activities. For this reason, induction activities should be held within the academic sphere so that all students may benefit from them (Thomas, 2012a). There may be many reasons why students choose not to engage with social activities within higher education, and the diversity of this cohort in terms of age and ethnicity suggests that many are non-traditional entrants. Universities need to adapt and offer cultures that welcome diversity (Johnson et al, 2007; Zepke & Leach, 2005). Our data suggests that getting the beginning right may be an important part of helping

students to engage, settle in and develop securely as learners. This may in turn increase student retention.

Conclusion

The issues highlighted here included the importance of fostering a sense of belonging, clarity about programmes of study and the nature of induction programmes offered. Regardless of the type of educational institution or method of delivery, these are pertinent to all higher education institutions to enhance student experience and engagement. A clear description of courses to students to avoid a mismatch in their expectations is needed. An induction programme, carried on throughout the first year and placed with the academic sphere, is needed to smooth student transition from Level 3 to 4. This will require university investment allowing staff time and resource to adequately support students. Further research into levels of satisfactions among BME students on the foundation year is required. Fostering a sense of belonging in Level 3 students may help to enhance retention.

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